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ABSTRACT

Administering a writing program has never been easy, and the issue of political correctness has added a new dimension to this difficult task. At the University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill), a controversy began when a cluster of statues, presented to the school by the graduating class, was attacked as being sexist and racist. According to the testimony of the writing program director, many composition teachers initially saw the situation as a good opportunity for writing assignments. Complaints from teachers arose, however, when student reaction was generally conservative; complaints from students arose when bad grades were given for papers unsympathetic to the politically correct view of the statues as prejudiced. Many instructors complained to the director that only a "fascist" would fail to support their vision of progressive, often radical politics. Informal research by the program director suggests that on many campuses, literature and writing courses reflect such radical pedagogies, often in striking ways, leading the director to sense a fundamental shift in the goals of liberal education in general and composition instruction in particular. Cultural pluralism as radical pedagogy presents a serious problem for administrators seeking instructional consistency, always a difficult goal for a program administrator. The growing intolerance of teachers for the views of their students should strike all program directors as disturbing, especially those who believe that the teaching of rhetoric is inseparable from democracy, which assumes that students may define themselves without instructor imposition. (HB)

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Program Administration in the Face of Political Correctness

Administering a writing program has never been easy. Composition directors have to deal with the often conflicting demands of deans, parents, students, and staff. Deans want larger classes in order to save money. Parents want assurance that their children will be able to enroll in composition at a time when budget cuts are reducing the number of available sections by as much as 20 percent. Students want easier assignments and higher grades. And the staff wants smaller classes, better students, higher pay, fewer meetings, and more autonomy.

No wonder composition directors get such headaches.

Administration is further complicated by an almost perpetual tension between directors and their staffs. Let's face it, many composition teachers share the belief that any one of them could do a better job of managing the program. This perception seems especially strong where the director has formal training in rhetoric and composition and the staff does not, which is true of many large programs staffed by teaching assistants. As a result, directors find themselves balancing their efforts to help teachers develop their own theories and practices with decisions that keep a program from fragmenting into isolated units. Effective directors in this respect resemble accomplished dancers: They know when to let their partners move to their inner rhythms and when to lead to maintain the integrity of the dance.

Political correctness has added a new dimension to this *pas de deux*. At Chapel Hill, it began, innocently enough, with the long-standing tradition of a senior-class gift to the University. Last year, the gift was a cluster of statues entitled "The Student Body." In an effort to capture the spirit of undergraduate life at Carolina, the artist portrayed several students walking across campus. One of the sculptures showed a black woman carrying a pile of books on her head; another showed a man, also with books. The third showed a man and woman walking together holding hands, the woman's head tilted slightly to touch the man's shoulder. A fourth statue represented an Asian female. The final sculpture paid tribute to Carolina's history as a basketball power; it was a stylized

representation of one of the University's more celebrated alumni, Michael Jordan, balancing a basketball on one finger.

Within hours after being unveiled, the statues came under attack for being both sexist and racist. Various student groups demanded that the statues be removed from campus grounds and that the administration apologize for the moral affront of placing the sculpture near the entrance of the main library. A group tried covering the statues with a tarp to hide their offensiveness. Then one night, the statues were vandalized somehow. Even though they were bolted into concrete, they were toppled to the ground. One lost part of an arm, another a foot, and someone stole Michael Jordan's basketball after prying it loose with a crowbar.

Many of our composition teachers saw the situation as an excellent opportunity for a writing assignment, and they quickly produced prompts to get students working before the controversy subsided. The typical assignment asked students to analyze the sculpture and the reaction to it. Initially, our students seemed to respond enthusiastically. They wrote and wrote and wrote, and a large part of our staff walked around smiling about this success.

It wasn't long, however, before the enthusiasm evaporated. I began hearing teachers grumbling in the hallways about how their classes were full of young Republicans who were irremediably conservative. Then students from a dozen different classes came to see me with their complaints, and I knew we had a problem.

From class after class, students told a similar story. They had finished a draft and had followed the requirements of the assignment. They had enjoyed the work because they saw it as being relevant to recent discussions in other classes: A couple of weeks earlier our notorious Senator, Jesse Helms, had made headlines by trying to cut funding to the National Endowment for the Arts because it supports "pornography." His effort was analyzed in classes all over campus, including some of our own in the Writing Program. Some students believed that those who were attacking the sculpture were guilty of the same sort of censorship that Helms was preaching and that censorship has no place in America, and certainly not at a university.

The students said that this position made their teachers very unhappy. Many teachers informed students that censorship was not the issue, that they *had* to see the statues as being sexist and racist. They were told to revise their papers to reflect the sexism and racism inherent in the sculpture--failure to do so would result in a low grade. In some classes, it would result in an *F*.

I have to admit that these reports puzzled me. I received too many from too many different classes to label them a fabrication. But on the other hand, our training program goes to great lengths to emphasize the student-centered nature of our courses, which are supposed to be places where teachers help students discover voice and ideas, not places where teachers impose them. When I asked the teachers involved to discuss the complaints with me, my puzzlement grew. The teachers informed me that they had indeed told their students that any paper that did not characterize the sculpture as being sexist and racist would receive a low grade. I asked about the motivation for this position and was told that alternate views are insufferable and an affront to human dignity. Several stated that they believed it their duty to "silence" those voices that are not aligned with a progressive political agenda. When I mentioned that such a position was in direct conflict with the philosophy and goals of the Writing Program as well as the University, the teachers suggested that their actions were protected by the principles of academic freedom. More than a few implied that I was a fascist if I failed to support their vision of progressive politics.

I had encountered this kind of talk before in the confrontational pedagogy advocated by such writers as John Macedo, Henry Giroux, and Susan Jarratt. I became curious to know if other administrators were experiencing similar situations, so I made a few phone calls. Although several chairs and directors informed me that everything in their programs was copacetic, many more reported a growing emphasis among their staffs on politically correct action and thought.

On one campus, a teacher of modern American literature began his first class of the semester by announcing that the work of Faulkner, Hemingway, Steinbeck, and O'Neill reflects the cultural imperialism of white European males and that those who read it are perpetuating the marginalization of subjugated groups. He then informed students that, to break down the existing hegemony, they would spend the term reading Harlequin Romances.

On another campus, several teachers told their composition students that lesbians are a repressed group; the teachers had decided it was their mission to ease that repression by forcing students to confront lesbian issues. Consequently, all the reading and writing assignments would focus on lesbianism. When writing, students were to pretend to be lesbians, so they could better understand the perspective of this repressed group. Several students met individually with their teachers afterwards and explained that they didn't mind focusing on lesbian issues but that they didn't feel comfortable with the role playing. They cited religious reasons. They asked if they could have an alternative assignment that required similar writing skills but that didn't ask them to pretend to be lesbians. The teachers told them that they could drop the course if they wanted to but that they would receive no special assignments.

On yet another campus, a teacher told composition students that standard English is a tool that the white ruling class uses to subjugate blacks. Consequently, the language of her course was going to be Black English Vernacular. She said she expected students not only to speak it in class but also to use it for their compositions. Errors in grammar and usage (Black English Vernacular grammar and usage) would lower the grade on a paper significantly. When several students--black as well as white--voiced their concerns after class, the teacher told the white students, reportedly with some satisfaction, that they were finally going to taste what it feels like to be a minority. If they had a problem with that, they could drop. She told the black students, who were anxious to improve their writing skills and who suspected that this approach wouldn't help them much when they had to write papers for their other courses, that they should stop trying to be white.

These reports matched my own experience at Chapel Hill in some interesting ways. Although I am certainly not naive when it comes to political correctness and am keenly aware of the controversies that have surfaced on many campuses over the last couple of years, I nevertheless sensed that some sort of fundamental shift was taking place in the perceived goals of a liberal arts education in general and of composition instruction in particular. Historically, the implicit aim of the liberal arts and composition has been to provide students with the tools of knowledge, intellect, and language necessary to become leaders rather than followers, to help them explore a range of ideas,

philosophies, and experiences so that they can discover their own voices and identities. It now seemed clear that some teachers had come to distrust this process to such an extent that they felt compelled to impose their own voices, their own identities, on students. Failing that, they would simply use intimidation to silence any who offered a response that was not an echo of their own world view.

Writing program administrators know that one of the more difficult parts of their job is maintaining instructional consistency. The larger the program, the harder the task. Students, parents, and deans expect writing classes to be essentially the same from one section to another. They become disturbed when a writing assignment in one section asks students to analyze Marx's theory of the alienation of labor while a corresponding assignment in another section asks students to describe how to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Each of these groups tends to view composition as a skill-oriented course designed to help students succeed as undergraduates and to prepare them for graduate school or the work place. They invest composition with certain competencies and proficiencies that they believe all students must master. In their view, equity demands that instruction be uniform.

Teachers, on the other hand, often resist consistency on philosophical grounds that circumvent such pragmatic expectations. Many argue that conformity of any kind is detrimental to human development and social equality. Although this view is widely understood to be linked to Romanticism and its emphasis on the individual, the politicization of contemporary thought has led many to phrase their rejection of conformity and consistency in terms of *cultural pluralism*. Conformity in this account is no longer simply the antithesis of pluralism, which has been imbued with a moral component that functions as a minefield for logos-driven discourse. It is the hegemony of the ruling class, the perpetuation of the status quo, the stifler of multiculturalism, the mutilator of freedom.

It's difficult not to sympathize with this view. We all believe in freedom and pluralism, and the collapse of old regimes, canons, and ideologies has prompted many to call, if not for a renewed emphasis on creating an ethical democracy, then at least for a new theory of ethics. Nevertheless,

this view presents a serious problem for program administrators for whom conformity and instructional consistency are virtually synonymous, because it subverts the mission of the university. When students lose opportunities to take the risks necessary to develop their own voices and identities, they also lose the ability to think independently. They have little hope of assuming any leadership role. Equally problematic is the incipient threat to the democratization that has characterized education and composition alike over the last 30 years, for which directors are, willingly or not, occasional torchbearers. Inevitably, directors not only have to face, but also have to decide how they will deal with, an uncomfortable reality: The urge to silence students may pass as political correctness or as a call for moral rectitude in some instances, but beneath the surface lies a very old affliction--intolerance.

The growing intolerance of teachers for the views and values of students in composition courses should strike all program directors as troubling. We understand, of course, that teachers just didn't wake up one day and decide that their students' values were insufferable. But this judgment and the associated intolerance are also linked to complex perceptions of who we are and who we want to be. They are bound to increasingly rigid social strata that differentiate insiders from outsiders in a world of shrinking resources and opportunities. According to the National Science Foundation, for example, the United States has undergone a significant sociological change over the last decade. Specific groups have become more homogeneous, and the process is continuing at an accelerated pace. The differences between groups, however, are increasing, leading to a more fragmented, heterogeneous society.

The most visible, but certainly not the only, sign of this change is economic. As the middle class shrinks, the victim of rising taxes and prices, and as the gap between rich and poor grows ever wider, the characteristics of those in each group become more homogeneous. In addition, the level of tension, and in some cases outright animosity, across groups increases in proportion to the level of perceived difference. Some sociologists liken the emerging behavioral patterns to a form of tribalism, in which each group, bound by ties of education, or employment, or income, or even culture--but not blood--is not merely intolerant but is actually hostile to outsiders. It is against this

background of change that we see a progressive country such as Sweden building a new type of planned community: villages in which all the residents share common characteristics. There's one village of engineers, one of accountants, another of programmers. If you're a programmer, you can't live in the engineers' village, and vice versa. It is against this background that, in our country, we view increasing instances of gay bashing, a growing backlash against feminism, and rising racial and ethnic violence.

This is pluralism, but not the sort we want to live with. It is difference with a vengeance, fueled by an aggregation of perceived slights, insults, and offenses that are repressed until they spill over. This is a pluralism of silences, not of discourses.

As composition instructors, we understand that silence is a condition of the unempowered, the subjugated, but not all of us clearly understand the responsibility that we are entrusted with when we teach. Even fewer, perhaps, understand the etiology of the efforts to silence students whose views and values may be incongruent with their own: that they may be responding to social forces working well below the conscious level. Intolerance in the classroom is yet one more symptom of growing fragmentation and tribal competition for resources. What all composition teachers *must* understand, however, is that we are abusing our power when we use our authority in the classroom to diminish students. It is a director's job to help teachers become more aware of the potential for abuse and to point out that such behavior does nothing to inculcate enlightened thinking but just the opposite. It provides students with an indelible model of typical bullying, in which the stronger impose their will on the weaker.

Bullying, of course, is not what academic freedom is about. Many of us in composition, however, have only a fuzzy understanding of academic freedom. Over the past year, I've had to explain on numerous occasions that academic freedom pertains primarily to writing and research, not to the curriculum and certainly not to teacher-student interactions. I also have had to tell UNC's composition teachers that our mainstream writing courses are not proper forums for espousing political views. If they are interested in focusing on politics, they should request to teach one of our writing-across-the-curriculum political science courses. If they are interested in focusing on race

and gender issues, they should request to teach one of our special sections devoted to race and gender.

What we teach--rhetoric--is inseparable from democracy. And democracy assumes that people, including students, are able to define themselves, without the imposition of politicians or teachers. Currently, composition teachers face a crisis of faith. That is, do we have sufficient faith in human nature and the democratic process to trust students to make responsible decisions? Although a large percentage of any program staff will answer no, I believe it is a director's administrative duty, in the face of political correctness, to keep assuring teachers that we must answer this question with a resounding yes.